

Nevada Test Site

Wildlife at the Nevada Test Site

April 2003



Introduction

A diverse and complex mosaic of plant and animal communities are found at the Nevada Test Site. Representative of both the Mojave and Great Basin deserts, approximately 1,500 animal species, including 924 species of insects, and 750 different kinds of plants occur at the site.

The varying elevations and climatic conditions at the test site contribute to the distribution of plant and animal communities. On the south end of the site, Jackass Flats lies at a low 2,688 feet above sea level while Rainier Mesa, in the north, rises to a high of 7,679 feet above sea level.



Nevada Test Site Animals

Coyotes, kit foxes, pronghorn antelope, desert tortoises, sidewinder snakes, bald eagles, kangaroo rats, and peregrine falcons are just a few of the more than 1,500 animal species found on the Nevada Test Site. Invertebrates comprise the majority of animals on the site with approximately 1,200 species. Spiders, scorpions, beetles, centipedes, and ants are some of these species living on the test site.



Two pronghorn antelope linger by the side of the road at the Nevada Test Site.

About 30-40 wild horses live on or near Rainier Mesa in the northern part of the test site. Pronghorn antelope have been sighted from Mercury to Yucca Flat, and desert bighorn sheep are thought to be rare visitors on the test site. They have been seen in Mercury and on Rainier Mesa, but do not reside permanently anywhere on the site. Desert kangaroo rats are associated with loose, sandy soils at lower elevations while dark kangaroo mice stay near fine, gravel-like soils at higher elevations. The many natural springs, man-made ponds, and sewage lagoons attract a variety of migrating birds and waterfowl. The diversity of test site land and climate

makes it an ideal home for many different types of animals.

Nevada Test Site Plants

In addition to the large variety of animal species, the Nevada Test Site also boasts more than 750 varieties of plants. Because the site lies on the transition between the Mojave and Great Basin deserts, elements of both deserts are found in a diverse and complex flora. About 67 families of plants are represented, however, one-third of them belong to just three families: sunflowers, grasses, and buckwheats.



Yucca Plants, such as this one, are common at the Nevada Test Site.

Joshua trees, a Yucca found in most southwestern states, are numerous in this area and are present on the test site in lower-middle elevations. Many of them are around 100 years old but are hard to age because they do not have annual growth rings like most trees. Juniper and pinyon grow at the higher elevations, especially on Rainier and Pahute Mesas where the elevation is more than 4,000 feet above sea level. Other vegetation present on the site include grasses, flowering desert plants, tumbleweed, sagebrush, and creosote bush, a bush

characteristic of the Mojave Desert and dominant in the southern parts of the test site.

Native American Use of Nevada Test Site Plants

Many of the plants on the Nevada Test Site were used by Native Americans. Food and beverage plants, medicinal and ceremonial plants, and utilitarian plants were all part of the Native American way of life.

Yuccas, such as Joshua trees, were important plants to Native Americans on the site. Not only were they used as a fiber source for baskets and as a source for soap, the flowers on Yucca plants are edible. Leafy plants provide yet another traditional source of food in the desert. Pahute Mesa offered several leafy food plants that were eaten as greens or added to other food. Mormon tea, common on the mesas of the test site, also had several uses. It was used to treat kidney ailments and also as an astringent. Its most prevalent use was for beverages such as tea.

Protected Species

The desert tortoise is the only animal species commonly found on the Nevada Test Site that is protected under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. It is listed as a threatened species, and the Nevada Site Office is required to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure that test site activities do not jeopardize the continued existence of the desert tortoise or destroy their habitat. Tortoises are found in the southern

portion of the test site and extend north to the northern edges of Jackass Flat, Frenchman Flat and the small valleys that separate them.



A Desert Tortoise makes its home at the Nevada Test Site.

No threatened or endangered plant species are known to occur on the Nevada Test Site.

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